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Wright Urges Requiring Disclosure of Covert Acts

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WASHINGTON, April 1 — In an unusual move, House Speaker Jim Wright testified before a subcommittee of the House Intelligence Committee today to endorse a bill that would require President Reagan to notify Congress in writing within 48 hours of starting a covert operation.

The measure is the first Congressional bill in response to the Iran-contra affair. It is designed to tighten a legal provision that permitted President Reagan to keep the House and Senate Intelligence Committees uninformed about his secret arms sales to

Iran for 10 months after he signed a "finding" authorizing the deals.

In other testimony today before the Subcommittee on Legislation, the bill was firmly opposed by Robert H. Michel, the House Republican leader, and three former top-ranking intelligence officials. They were Adm. Stansfield Turner and William E. Colby, both former Directors of Central Intelligence, and Ray Cline, a former deputy director of the C.I.A. for intelligence. Reflecting concern in the Administration, Mr. Michel said it would "put a strait-jacket on a future President."

But Mr. Wright said that the bill was only an attempt to clarify existing legislation, first enacted in 1974, which requires the President to notify the House and Senate Intelligence Committees of a covert operation, generally defined as a secret foreign military or intelligence operation, in a "timely fashion." The new bill would make two changes, Mr. Wright said. It would require that the notice by the President be in writing and that, in "extraordinary circumstances affecting the vital interests of the United States," the notification come not more than 48 hours after the President has approved the operation.

If the new measure had been in effect, Mr. Wright asserted, "it is quite

probable that the national embarrassment of the entire Irangate episode would have been avoided."

Mr. Wright's appearance at the outset of hearings was an indication that he was prepared to put the weight of the Speaker's office behind the bill, several Congressmen said, and reflected the concern and anger in Congress over the sale of arms to Iran and the reported diversion of profits to the Nicaraguan rebels. It is rare for hearings on a bill to begin with testimony by the Speaker and the House minority leader.

The bill was introduced by Representative Louis Stokes, an Ohio Democrat who is chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, and Representative Edward P. Boland, a Massachusetts Democrat and a former chairman of the committee.

Representative Robert W. Kastenmeier, Democrat of Wisconsin, described the proposed measure as "indeed modest" and a simple "tightening up of the statute in order to carry out its original intent."

But Admiral Turner said that the bill could endanger the lives of American intelligence agents and that, if it had been in effect while he was head of the C.I.A. under President Carter, it would have prevented several critical covert operations. One of these, he said, was the secret mission to help the six members of the American embassy in Teheran who had hidden in the Canadian embassy after their compound was seized. The operation to arrange their escape took three months to plan and involved sending a C.I.A. agent into Teheran at risk to his life, Admiral Turner related. Congress was not noti-

fied of the operation until it was completed, he said.

Referring to the proposal that the President notify the intelligence committees within 48 hours of a covert action, Admiral Turner said: "Timely is not measured by the clock. Timely is measured by risk." There should be no time limit on notification, he suggested, and instead Congress should rely on building a better relationship with the executive branch and the C.I.A. to insure better oversight.

Mr. Colby contended that "there are things the Congress doesn't need to know" and that, once a secret operation was disclosed to even one other person, it was no longer a secret. "I think we should look to proper execution of the law rather than to changing it," said Mr. Colby.